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SUBJECT: HMONG IN NORTHERN THAILAND ARE ASSIMILATING AND NETWORKING
WITH HMONG WORLDWIDE

CHIANG MAI 00000103 001.2 OF 003

Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary and Comment

¶1. (U) Over the past twenty years, the Hmong in northern Thailand have accepted a sedentary lifestyle and continue to assimilate into Thai society. Today, there are many agricultural Hmong communities in northern Thailand where trade in handicrafts and other products is growing. These Thai-Hmong communities are slowly creating global networks by using modern technology to connect with Hmong elsewhere. Their progress sharply contrasts with the situation of those Hmong residing in the de facto camp in Petchaboon Province or at immigration detention centers.

¶2. (SBU) Comment: The northern Thai-Hmong have a history of being on the move and selling opium. Nowadays, they live in a similar fashion to rural Thais, focusing on agriculture and the production and sale of local handicrafts. Even though the market for Hmong handicrafts is not significantly large, the industry is providing another means for Hmong to make money. Since the Hmong are now staying in one place, they have better means to accumulate goods and trade for profit. To grow their businesses, the Thai-Hmong are beginning to connect with other Hmong populations worldwide to find the cheapest inputs and sell to wider markets. Additionally, remittances and investments from abroad (also not significantly large) assist some families in meeting basic needs. Based on visits to Hmong communities, it seems like the Hmong in northern Thailand are adapting to their new lifestyle and will continue to evolve in Thai society, becoming more productive as they continue to learn new technologies and adjust to a market economy. End Summary and Comment.

Settling In

13. (U) The Hmong in Thailand are descendants of the Hmong/Miao who began migrating from Southern China over 200 years ago. There was an uptick in the Hmong population in Thailand after the American withdrawal from Vietnam in the mid 1970s. Some of these political refugees, mostly Lao-Hmong, were placed in camps while others settled in various Hmong communities in the North. The Hmong in Thailand have often been characterized by outside observers as swiddeners who specialize in producing opium. Since the mid 1970s, the Hmong in Thailand have significantly reduced their dependence on the opium trade and now live sedentarily as non-poppy-based farmers and artisans.

14. (U) Today, there are approximately 154,000 Hmong living in Thailand in 260 villages. Ninety percent of Thai-Hmong have Thai citizenship, allowing them to legally own property, vote, receive health care, and send their children to school. Furthermore, Hmong communities can receive vocational training, funding from central government grants, and assistance to promote tourism. Nonetheless, the conversion of many highland areas into national parks and forest preserves and other restrictions on construction remain challenges for the Hmong and highlanders in general. Hmong communities continue working to develop the tourism sector as foreign interest in observing hill tribe communities increases and expatriated Hmong come back to visit their native land.

Citizenship equals assimilation

CHIANG MAI 00000103 002.2 OF 003

15. (SBU) An ethnic Thai-Hmong professor at Chiang Mai University stated that the Hmong in Thailand are assimilating into Thai culture and face minimal discrimination from Thais. He also noted numerous instances of Hmong/Thai intermarriages. ConGenOffs observed this assimilation by visiting two separate Hmong communities, where local populations successfully transitioned from a swidden culture to a sedentary agro-centric lifestyle similar to surrounding Thai villagers. Hmong Communities are growing small plots of rice and other produce, mainly for local consumption with the excess being sold at market.

More than agriculture

16. (U) Although the Hmong typically work in the agriculture sector, some act as merchants and produce local handicrafts. Hmong populations that live near tourist areas are able to produce clothing and handbags to sell to foreigners and Thais alike. ConGenOffs talked to numerous Hmong traders who said they do not have any specific style of handicrafts, rather, the Hmong evolve with market demand and will produce products that sell, not necessarily products that are endemic to Hmong (unless for personal consumption).

17. (U) Additionally, Hmong products are rarely handmade anymore. A Hmong trader we spoke with stated that many

producers are using more technology and marketing techniques, such as textile design software, sewing machines, business cards and websites to increase sales and efficiency (although most marketing and design services are outsourced to ethnic Thais). Unfortunately, the global economic crisis has slowed demand for Hmong products and local revenues are down in comparison to previous years, stated a Hmong trader.

18. (U) The Thai-Hmong do not have a specific style to their products; they are trying to diversify by creating hemp products that ethnic Thais do not produce. At one village we visited, there was a sewing and batik group that imported hemp cloth from Hmong-Chinese. This group either resold the cloth for profit after dyeing it or produced hand bags and other apparel after decorating it. Villagers reported that they could make between 300 and 400 THB (9-12 USD) a day producing hemp products.

19. (U) Aside from handicrafts, surprisingly, the movie business is growing in Thai-Hmong communities. We met with a Hmong movie producer in Phayao Province who creates films that show traditional Hmong life, specific celebrations, Hmong music videos, etc. and sells them abroad. He said he receives funding from Hmong-American investors who pay the initial costs of a production in return for the final product sent to the U.S. for distribution. The movie producer has a high-quality video camera and interesting scripts, while actors and actresses can make 30,000 THB (900 USD) per movie.

Common language and culture helps trade for stateless Hmong

110. (U) Since the Thai-Hmong are entering commercial markets and have a long history of migration, ConGenOffs asked whether they have trade networks abroad. The professor at Chiang Mai University and a prominent Thai-Hmong leader both said that the Thai-Hmong do not have significantly large networks due to the fact that the turbulence during the Vietnam War severed many old familial and commercial networks. They stated that some minor international trade takes place through family connections where Thai-Hmong send traditional handicrafts and food stuffs to the West.

CHIANG MAI 00000103 003.2 OF 003

111. (U) Interviews of Thai-Hmong villagers gave a clearer picture about connections abroad. Although the information did not prove the Hmong have significantly large global networks, there are signs of emerging networks with Hmong in other countries. The Hmong are using the internet, cell phones, and other social networks to reach Hmong outside of Thailand. Hmong transnational networks are most highly concentrated in Southeast Asia and China, but there are some minor commercial connections back to third countries, including the U.S.

112. (U) A number of Hmong villagers in Chiang Rai and Phayao stated that Chinese-Hmong merchants come down through Laos and sell their products to Thai-Hmong. Unfortunately, trade with the Chinese-Hmong is typically one-way, as they do not purchase many Thai-Hmong products to bring back to China. Villagers stated that trade is more reciprocal with the Lao-Hmong, as they act as middlemen for China or sell produce in Thai markets while

the Thai-Hmong sell finished products to these Lao-Hmong traders.

¶13. (U) Outside of Southeast Asia, friends and relatives provide a majority of the opportunities to export abroad, reported Hmong traders. A common way for the Thai-Hmong to gain connections in the U.S. and elsewhere is through marriage. Hmong-American men often come to Thailand and find Thai-Hmong wives to take home. These relationships are common as the Hmong-Americans share the same language and culture (White Hmong) as the Thai-Hmong. With these new connections, family members of wives can access new markets, albeit small, across the Pacific.

Few handouts from abroad

¶14. (U) Since many Thai-Hmong have family living abroad, ConGenOffs asked whether local communities receive a significant amount of remittance income. In each village staff visited, villagers responded that remittances are typically small and only occur when a Thai-Hmong girl marries an American. Additionally, villagers stated that it was expected that the Thai-Hmong send some local product back to the remitter as a sign of thanks for the assistance. There was one instance where a growing Hmong village of former refugees in Phayao Province received a substantial amount of remittances. This town of 400 Hmong received remittance income around 6 million THB (175,000 USD) in 2008, which ConGenOffs suspect was to help the new community get settled. In other villages, remittance incomes appeared not to contribute very much to local economies as each location visited was exceptionally poor.

¶15. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
ANDERSON